

## Summer in Athens

1986, Greece, Athens, summer, August, Lunchtime, 40 degrees Celsius in the shade. Simply wonderful!

The city is drenched in a bright, glittering sunlight. The wind moves gently, creating hazy pictures. The air smells of a mixture of saltwater and urban mishmash. On distant streets small triangular surfaces of water can be seen, they look incredibly real but are in fact only mirages. Busy Athenians flow around the leisurely tourists like swarms of fish swim around the cliffs. Everyone is sweating!

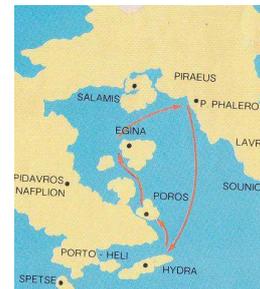
It is THE month of summer holidays and anyone who can or needs to have fled from the furnace of the city to one of the many thousands of Greek beaches, to relatives in the countryside or to the mountains. Therefore, instead of haematomas, the traffic flows even during high frequency times.

Relatively speaking, it is even quieter after two o'clock in the afternoon, when those who have remained behind have left their fully air-conditioned offices and shops for lunch. They press themselves out over the veins into their residential areas. Even if only a few tens of thousands of people have left the city, for a villager it seems like a mass migration.

In three hours, the busy life will flow back again into the heart of the city.

The city pulsates in an oven. And I love it!

On a glorious summer morning, the three of us – Alex, Tina and Toni – set off for a one-day island-hopping tour around the Saronic Islands: Hydra, Poros and Aegina. Although it may sound stressful, it is actually a comfortable short visit due to the close proximity of the three islands to the mainland.



Unusually for our holiday, we have to get up early, go directly into the city and take the bus to Paleo Faliro, Athens' port, where the island boat waits for us. Like a magnet, it pulls people in from all sides and merges them one by one over the bow and stern bridges. With every person that drips in, the volume of the hubbub rises. Although predominantly Greek and English, our ship is filled with a stew of European languages, seasoned with a few blessings from as far afield as Arabian and North African climes. Even when we pick out our mother tongues, there is one thing we all have in common. We are all tourists who aim to have an eventful day of travel.



This is why the general mood after setting off was cheerful, relaxed and full of anticipation for our first stop, Hydra!

Although it was free of cars, free of hotel complexes, and free of mass tourism, in the summer months it was inundated with swarms of tourists almost every hour. Having barely arrived, there must be something for free on this Island somewhere been at least , or there was a unique opportunity awaiting the people, who were gushing out in torrents.

However, we also observed this phenomenon of sudden emptying, also at the two subsequent disembarkation points. This was obviously to do with the limited amount of time at the stops on the islands.



Naturally, there was not enough time to do more than take a long walk through the port and the narrow alleys of the adjacent old city, accompanied by Greek ice-cream and a couple of small purchases. But, it was long enough for us to capture the city's atmosphere, to anchor a few more impressions and form a wish of returning again at a quieter time and staying for longer.

The boat continued on to Poros, the smallest of the three islands and therefore, also the shortest stop on our trip that day. It was only a stone's throw away from the Peloponnese coastline. We flooded the quay and flocked to the port and the old city as quickly as we could. Here too, we saw snapshots of fishing boats, old houses, men in *kafenions* and rows of *tavernas* and shops. A picturesque dream of apparently carefree life in white, blue and light brown, bathed in the glittering light of the Hellenic midday sun. Time passed a bit differently on the island.

The last leg of the journey would take us to Aegina. As the second largest island in the Saronic Gulf, it lies almost exactly between the Attic mainland and the Peloponnese peninsula. This time, we had a choice of going on the usual sightseeing and shopping trips, swimming in the sea or making an excursion to the temple of the fertility goddess Aphaia. However, fate had other plans for me. And a simple rope end triggered it all. A piece of rigging had fallen in the way on the ship from the ship's rail, and I picked it up to put it back in its place so that no one would trip over it.

Down I went, still grasping the rope, even though it wasn't attached to the top any more. From one moment to the next, I had a total blockage in my back muscles and a stabbing pain in my sciatic nerve, radiating down my leg. I saw the state of shock on the face of my dearest, and three question marks in that of my son, while the people around me were shaking their heads. The cause came to me whilst I was still on the railings and had thrown myself down onto the first available seat. It wasn't the first time that something similar had happened to me, but normally it was a longer process preceded by stress. The unpredictability and the severity of this pain was not only new to me, but to my own surprise was literally tattooed on my forehead.

After our pleasure boat had been moored in Aegina and the flood of passengers had pressed on past us to the shore, we slowly and agonizingly disembarked. I sent my wife and son off to the beach, and climbed down an iron ladder on the harbour wall into the sea in the hope that the weightlessness, and the relaxation associated with it would ease the pain. Unfortunately, this attempt was in vain. I swam at a right angle back to our tourist boat again, jammed myself into a halfway comfortable chair, and waited until everyone, including my own two, came back on board and the boat set sail for Athens.

Our little one had already infuriated his mother on the beach because he didn't want to come out of the water, and was now taking advantage of my immobility, going wild on the sundeck, which, while fighting pain, drove me ever closer to losing my temper. Once more, we were only met with incomprehension from our fellow travellers. We were finally relieved from this in the evening when we reached our destination port and sat on the bus going to the city centre.



Once off the bus, we had to find a taxi which would take us to our holiday resort. This was no easy fete with the evening city transport. Apparently we formed an pitiful literary picture reminiscent of Hugo's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," in which my wife was Esmeralda with her child, and I, crooked and hunchbacked with bent knees, passed for the Hunchback. A policeman, standing on the edge of the curb observing the traffic, noticed our fruitless attempts and suddenly bounded in between the cars travelling in the left lane, with a piercing alarm signal coming from his trilling pipe and one arm raised up. He walked straight up to an

unoccupied taxi, drew it as if by magic out of the never-ending flow of metal and directed it right in front of us.

As we got in we raised our hands to thank him, and he replied with the same gesture, before he devoted himself once again to the turmoil.

In the end, I lay prone for nearly a week, and only after taking syringes and tablets could I move to some degree again and attend a friend's wedding.

The individual memories of our excursion have faded considerably in the last 30 years. But, the image of the helpful Greek policeman, who bravely dashed into the flowing traffic to find us a ride, has always remained, imprinted on my consciousness.

By AnA (pseudonym), Germany.

Translated by Kate Goodby and proof-read by Rachel Beverley within the initiative PerMondo. Sponsored by Mondo Agit offering translations from German into English.